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Internet, an Acceleration Factor in Informal Lifelong Learning ?

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IT technologies are said to make access to learning easier and cheaper. Virtually all theoretical knowledge is available in one form or another on the web, with possibilities for beginners as well as, in certain cases, for extremely sophisticated users. This availability throws into question the way we learn, especially the younger generation, those having been born with these technologies. This article contributes to this debate, surveying an undergraduate population of 139 students on their learning strategies regarding not only academic theoretical knowledge, as it is traditionally analyzed, but also by studying the different kinds of knowledge that is accessible on the Internet (non-academic theoretical, as well as hands-on learning in all of its varied forms). Data analysis techniques allow us first to identify four structuring factors of online informal learning in relation with Internet use and then to propose a typology of learning behaviors that thus allows us to show the impact of Internet use. We show that Internet use seems to create "multiplier" effects on online informal learning and that this phenomenon is greater for hands on knowledge learning than for theoretical knowledge learning for the student's studies or outside of their studies.

Introduction.

The spread of IT technologies has dramatically reshaped the structure of our economies, and today, manufacturing jobs and industries are no longer the major asset in global competition for developing countries that they once were. Today, to quote the OECD, "knowledge workers [...] are increasingly pivotal to economic success in developed countries" (OECD 2007).

This has a two sided consequence for lifelong learning. To stay in this knowledge race, people, firms and countries have to increase their investment in training. But, as noticed above, IT technologies are said to make the access to learning easier, cheaper. Virtually all theoretical knowledge is available in one form or another on the web, with possibilities for beginners as well as, in certain cases, for extremely sophisticated users. Effectively, nowadays, it seems that any and everybody can learn about almost any desired subject in an easily accessible way. The Internet is a significant source of an increasingly diverse body of knowledge, a sort of "one-stop shopping paradise" for those seeking to learn : theoretical knowledge like foreign language or music theory or practical, hands-on skills. A few examples might include someone seeking guidance concerning a cooking recipe, an individual attempting to solve a technical problem related to his personal computer or someone needing to repair his washing machine. In light of these developments, scholars have started to debate if this new learning media changes the way people learn, and especially how it can impact the teaching process. Following Brown (2002), it has been argued that the most recent generations, who since their birth, that have grown up with computers, the Internet, mobile telephones, and the services offered by the convergence of these three media, (and are as a result called "digital native") may learn differently and thus use digital technologies differently to learn (Ezziane 2007). In this work, we will observe the generation immediately preceding the "digital natives". For us 2 the "Y generation" is in a unique position considering its age, and thus is likely to have already accumulated multiple and various learning experiences. Coming back to previous academic literature, it has generally looked at a specific kind of knowledge, i.e. theoretical, or "academic knowledge", transmitted by schools in our countries, and mainly based on written supports and interactions between teachers and pupils (cf. the issue of *Réseaux* dedicated to this theme and coordinated by A. Ben Youssef and A. Rallet). This literature has adopted a vantage point in an institution or a group of institutions and has taken the point of view of the learning produced by this institution. But other knowledge exists and may be as relevant as theoretical knowledge for lifelong learning, that being "nonacademic hands on knowledge" or "non-academic theoretical knowledge" which we will describe later in this work. Here we adopt the point of view of the learner, taking into

account the globality of his online learning. Can we say that access to the Internet, which spreads knowledge at the feet of any user, allowing them the possibility to freely pick among the available riches is a general and uniform factor of knowledge diffusion ? Or, is the Internet media better suited to certain types of learning and less for others ? As Brown (2002) remarked a new media has never replaced an older one, but rather reshaped its use. This question only makes sense when posed in reference to a population having access to the Internet, therefore we do not consider any questions related to Internet access. On this basis, among those having Internet access, can it be said that all users learn in the same manner and with the same effectiveness ? And, especially amongst these students (the "Y" generation, or "Milleniar" generation, those who were born concurrently with the Internet), is the simple use of the Internet enough to allow them to benefit equally from the online learning facilities ? Or does highly effective Internet use (frequency and quality) support improved learning (quantity, quality and satisfaction as judged by the learner) ? 3 We take on this question by surveying students concerning their practices regarding online learning, leading us to develop a typology of learning behaviors that allows us to show the impact of Internet use. By choosing a student population we have access to a generation of individuals who, a priori, are open to new technologies like the Internet and should as a result be more homogeneous relative to Internet behavior and overall Internet vision than if we took a mixed generation sample. This study explores the effect of the degree of internet use on the effectiveness of voluntary online lifelong learning from the standpoint of the learner, but without any particular emphasis on socio-demographic issues. By limiting our study to university students, we effectively minimize external factors that could otherwise influence learning. The paper is structured as follows. The first section specifies the general context of the study : we define our work object and investigate how this subject has been dealt with in the literature. We then describe in the second section our methodological process before presenting the sample. The third section shows our results. Initially we refine the subject with descriptive analysis, and then, with data analysis techniques we identify the factors which structure learning via the Internet, examined from the viewpoint of Internet use. The final result is the emergence of a typology of learning behaviors that allow us to show the impact of internet use. A final discussion concludes this study.